DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 378 006 RC 019 914

TITLE	Rural Alaska Secondary Education Study: Task Force Recommendations.
INSTITUTION	McDowell Group, Juneau, AK.
SPONS AGENCY	Alaska State Dept. of Education, Juneau.
PUB DATE	May 94
NOTE	35p.; For complete study report and "Executive Summary", see RC 019 912-913.
PUB TYPE	Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Alaska Natives; American Indian Education; Boarding Schools; Delivery Systems; *Educational Administration; *Educational Assessment; *Educational Development; Educational Research; Higher Education; *High Schools; *Rural Education; State Departments of Education; State School District Relationship
IDENTIFIERS	*Alaska; Task Force Approach

ABSTRACT

This report presents recommendations resulting from a study conducted during 1993-94 assessing rural secondary education in Alaska. Components of the study included a survey of 800 randomly selected rural households, a survey of boarding school graduates, an assessment of rural university student achievement, and other related research. A task force was appointed to review the research and to preside over public hearings concerning rural secondary education. The task force recommended to the Alaska State Department of Education that the state should: (1) facilitate the development of educational plans and assessments for rural secondary education at the local level; (2) investigate the feasibility of developing a junior college program at a rural boarding school; (3) facilitate the development of consolidated residential high schools; (4) enhance funding dedicated to public education; and (5) rewrite labor and tenure laws to allow rural school districts more control in hiring teachers. Additional recommendations and supporting discussion concerning boarding schools, vocational education, distance learning, correspondence programs, and high school/university transitional programs are also included. Contains 12 references. (LP)

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Rural Alaska Secondary Education Study

Task Force Recommendations

Prepared for:

State of Alaska
Department of Education

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May 1994

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Executive Summary

In April of 1993, the Alaska Department of Education commissioned the ***Rural Alaska Secondary Education Study***, a comprehensive assessment of rural high school education needs. The McDowell Group, a Juneau-based research and consulting firm, conducted the study. The study included a survey of 800 randomly selected households throughout rural Alaska, a survey of Mt. Edgecumbe High School graduates, an assessment of rural student achievement at the University of Alaska, and other research.

As part of the ***Rural Alaska Secondary Education Study***, a task force composed of five Alaskans was appointed to review the McDowell Group's research, conduct public hearings, and develop recommendations for enhancing rural high school education. This report is the formal presentation of those recommendations.

Task Force Summary Recommendations

The State should facilitate the development of education plans and assessments for rural secondary education with community and regional leaders. Statewide planning for education does not work in Alaska, a state with widely diverse peoples and needs. The State should encourage to the maximum extent possible local control, responsibility and ownership of and for rural high school education.

The State should investigate the feasibility of developing a junior college curriculum/program at Mt. Edgecumbe . College bound rural high school students need a strong transitional program. Mt. Edgecumbe could be expanded into a junior college program which accepts high school juniors and assists in the transition to a bachelor-degree program. However, while this is being explored, Mt. Edgecumbe High School needs to increase parental and community involvement. An advisory school board would give voice to the parents and communities of Mt. Edgecumbe students.

The State should facilitate the development of consolidated high schools at the district or REAA level. Survey research and other data indicates a strong demand for boarding school capacity in Alaska. Mt. Edgecumbe High School is an important option that should be preserved for rural students. However, it is recommended that further boarding school development occur at the local or district level.

The State should enhance funding dedicated to the support of public education. It will be very difficult to improve the quality of rural high school education under the constant threat of declining funding. For rural communities and districts to offer a quality education, the State must insure a more predictable and sustainable level of funding.

The State should rewrite labor and tenure laws in favor of the children. Current tenure law is particularly troublesome for rural districts. Rural districts require more flexibility, especially during periods of declining funding. Communities and districts need more control in determining who teaches their children.

Additional recommendations and supporting discussion concerning boarding schools, vocational education, distance learning, correspondence programs and high school/university transitional programs follow this summary.

Introduction

In April 1993, the Alaska Department of Education contracted with the McDowell Group, a Juneau-based research and consulting firm, to conduct ***The Rural Alaska Secondary Education Study***. The study involved evaluating high school educational opportunities currently available to rural students and developing potential solutions to rural Alaska's secondary education needs.

The six components of ***The Rural Alaska Secondary Education Study*** include:

- **The Mt. Edgecumbe High School Graduate Survey.** In the spring of 1993, all Mt. Edgecumbe High School (MEHS) graduates since 1986 (approximately 300) were mailed surveys designed to gather their opinions about how well the boarding school experience prepared them for college, trade school, and employment. In an attempt to survey all graduates, follow-up telephone calls were also made. In all, 152 surveys were completed.

- **The Rural Community Household Survey.** In the spring of 1993, a telephone survey of 800 rural households was conducted to gauge public attitudes about high school educational opportunities currently available in rural communities. This survey also provides insight into what improvements to secondary education the rural public would like to see.

- **Research Summary and Bibliography.** In December 1993, a two part research review was developed. Part I covered national research and outlined several options to improve rural secondary education delivery. Part II reviewed Alaska research, indicating the benefits and limitations of the small local high school and residential high school.

- **Rural Student Achievement in the University of Alaska System.** In December 1993, an analysis of data from the University of Alaska compared the achievement of students from Rural Education Attendance Areas (REAAs) with their urban counterparts.

- **Executive Interviews.** In January 1994, a series of telephonic interviews were conducted with a wide range of persons involved in rural high school education, including teachers, superintendents, boarding school personnel, school board members, former students, researchers and parents.

- **Boarding School Site Criteria.** In February 1994, an analysis was conducted to construct the minimum criteria and infrastructure needs for boarding school development and operations.

These six studies are the basis for this final report which focuses on the identification and evaluation of potential solutions to rural Alaska's secondary education needs. In conjunction with a task force consisting of five people who have demonstrated keen interest in improving rural education, the study team identified and evaluated the economic and administrative practicality, market demand, and educational effectiveness of each option.

The Rural Secondary Education Task Force

A task force of five individuals, very active in rural education, was appointed to review the research completed by the McDowell Group and to preside over four public hearings on rural secondary education. The members of the task force are:

Carole Huntington, *Chair - Galena, Alaska*

Jim LaBelle - *Anchorage, Alaska*

Pete Schaeffer - *Kotzebue, Alaska*

Patricia "Di" Shearer - *Metlakatla, Alaska*

Mike Williams - *Akiak, Alaska*

Four public hearings, based in Ketchikan, Fairbanks, Kotzebue and Bethel, with a total of one hundred sites connected by teleconference network, were held. The hearings were transcribed and the written records provided to all task force members.

The focus of the hearings was to solicit public input on ways to enhance local high schools programs, as well as to gauge interest in expanding Mt. Edgecumbe High School or developing regional boarding schools.

After reviewing the public testimony and the completed research projects prepared by the McDowell Group, the Task Force developed recommendations for enhancing rural high school education.

After reviewing the public testimony and the completed research projects prepared by the McDowell Group, the Task Force developed recommendations for enhancing rural high school education. This report is the formal presentation of those recommendations.

Statement of the Issue

The purpose of this study was to assess the feasibility of enhancing the educational delivery system to rural secondary students in Alaska. Alternative educational opportunities, including residential high schools, were reviewed.

To summarize the results of the components of this study, there is no dispute that the quality of education in rural high schools varies across Alaska. The graduates of Mt. Edgecumbe High School apparently experience a greater success rate in post secondary education and the labor force than the majority of graduates from community high schools. Rural students, particularly Native students, are having much more difficulty completing college than urban students. The Rural Student Achievement study indicated that one in eight students from rural high schools has earned a degree, whereas the ratio for urban students in approximately one in three.

Throughout the Executive Interviews, the Rural Community Household Survey, and the MEHS Graduate Survey, there was the perception that boarding school students are receiving a higher quality education compared to the education they would receive in their home communities. Half of all the rural households surveys felt the educational opportunities at a boarding school was better. Seventy-three percent (73%) of MEHS graduates preferred to have their own children attend MEHS. However, there is also a strong feeling that community-based and culture-based secondary education should be available to all students. In fact, two-thirds of the rural households preferred to have children attend high school in their home community.

The issue therefore is how to improve the quality of rural secondary education. The research reviews led to the investigation of technological learning techniques, post secondary preparation and transitional programs, expansion of vocational education programs, residential high schools, community participation and teacher education. A natural consideration in the development of potential solutions centered on ways to provide funding.

This report presents some alternatives and considerations for rural high school education. These alternatives address not only the State of Alaska's constitutional obligation to education, but also that of teachers, principals, support staff, superintendents, school boards, community members, tribal councils, Native corporations, and parents.

The problems and solutions identified in this report are not new. Rural Alaska has struggled with these issues for decades. While education in rural Alaska has improved, perhaps there are barriers, systemic or structural in nature, which continue to impede further improvement. Nevertheless, it is the philosophy of the Task Force that improvement within the existing system is possible. Efforts to break down barriers must continue so that all students can be treated fairly, no matter where they come from.

At the core of these recommendations are the beliefs that all children can learn and that all Alaskans have ownership in and should accept responsibility for our system of education.

Administration of Rural High Schools

The Role of the Department of Education

By statute the duties of the Department of Education (DOE) include "general supervision" over public schools and providing "advisory and consultative services to all public school governing bodies and personnel" [AS 14.07.020(a)(1) & (2)]. DOE may also "enter into contractual agreements with school districts. . . to provide more efficient or economical education services...." [AS 14.07.030(7)] After consideration of the research, the Task Force concluded that a special need which DOE could fulfill for rural high schools is to provide technical assistance and expertise.

One of the advantages urban school districts have is the accessibility and availability of experts in education. Rural districts have difficulty utilizing expertise located within the state, not to mention outside of the state. Most rural budgets cannot accommodate the expense of bringing in a computer education expert or a specialist in fetal alcohol syndrome education. Even when cooperative efforts are made, travel presents its own special problems when trying to reach rural areas on a schedule.

Therefore, a practical consideration for rural high schools is for DOE to coordinate these direct and supportive efforts. By equalizing the technical advantage of urban schools, rural school quality could be improved through training and supportive services. Supportive services would reduce teacher turnover for rural high schools.

In order for DOE to coordinate the availability of technical assistance and expertise to rural high schools, a communication network will need to be established connecting DOE, school districts, school boards, advisory school boards, schools and communities. In its supervisory role, DOE is in the best position to open up communication lines between all of the various agencies involved in rural high school education. Indeed, the universities, who could well provide some of the technical assistance and expertise, should become an integral part of a communication system for education.

The Role of the School Board

Regional (REAA) school boards are powerful entities with fiscal, personnel, programming, regulatory and procedural jurisdiction over schools. They must establish advisory school boards in communities with more than fifty residents and determine the powers of these boards.

Some of the Task Force members are active school board members. Additionally, several persons with extensive experience on advisory, regional and state-wide school boards were interviewed. The Task Force concluded that for community members to succeed on any school board, mandatory training should take place to insure that all board members fully understand their obligations, duties and powers.

The first duty of a regional school board is to "provide. . . an educational program for each school age child who is a resident" [AS 14.08.111(1)]. A regional school board shall also "develop a philosophy of education, principles, and goals for its schools" [AS 14.08.111(2)]. Therefore, the burden of developing appropriate education plans falls to regional school boards.

It is the Task Force's contention that the State and the school boards must develop education plans and assessments for rural secondary high schools *with the local community*. Despite the mandate of AS 14.03.120 for regional school boards to develop an annual education plan for the districts, the Task Force concludes that a greater effort toward promoting community participation for rural high schools is necessary. Specifically, educational plans and assessments should be established for each rural high school. These plans could then be coordinated on the district level. Throughout this process, the State should work as advisor to local schools, community members and district personnel in developing these plans.

The Role of the Community

Rural communities need to feel they have some control over what is happening in their schools. Site-based management of rural high schools encourages local control, makes schools more accountable to their communities and allows the development of appropriate culture-based education.

The research review of education in Alaska reveals a history in which rural Alaskans, especially Alaska Natives, had little to no say in the education of their children. As a result, for some rural residents, boarding schools carry a negative connotation and they have a strong commitment to community-based schooling. However, as education funding becomes more problematic, the realization that some communities cannot support a high school must be confronted. The conflict for the community is loss and/or dissatisfaction with their local high school yet not wanting to relocate their children to a boarding school situation outside of the local area.

Local communities must be encouraged to take part in the decisions about what will happen to their high school-aged children. These decisions must result in actions which reflect some consensus between DOE, the school district and the community. What is right for one community, such as sending their students to MEHS, may not be right for another community within the same district. The truly diverse cultural, economic and geographic nature of Alaska must be acknowledged and incorporated into local education plans. That is, what is most efficient for the district may not be what is right for the community within the district. As Judith Kleinfeld stated in the Executive Interviews, the only right answers to how to enhance rural high school education are "the messy ones".

Part of this issue pertains directly to cultural preservation and education. Rural communities must be encouraged to take action to preserve and teach traditional culture to their children. Towards this purpose, it is imperative to involve parents and other community members in the planning of their high school programs, as models of behavior to the students. Community members must accept responsibility for the education system. Education and cultural preservation should go hand-in-hand.

An important role of the community is to provide a healthy environment for the children. During the teleconferences, some schools reported that up to thirty percent of their class were students with fetal alcohol syndrome. The research supported the negative influence of unhealthy communities on rural high school students, particularly noticeable in the boarding school research. Therefore, communities have an obligation to provide an atmosphere conducive to learning for their students.

The Task Force would like to see the development of programs which address these issues. For example, House Bill No. 320 relating to public school health personal safety education may be a step in the right direction. Rural communities are subject to many of the same influences as urban communities, however they do not have the supportive services, agencies and alternatives as urban areas. One action could be instituting a health curriculum, especially at the high school level. As these students graduate and become part of their communities, there will be a change to a healthier lifestyle. Another action could be expansion of services to rural high schools, such as providing more counselors, more training to teachers and aides on how to teach and cope with health-related issues in the classroom. With the support of DOE and regional school boards, local advisory school boards could directly apply positive programming promoting a healthy environment for their students.

Summary

The Rural Alaska Secondary Education Task Force recommends:

That the Department of Education and regional school boards develop education plans and assessments with local advisory boards for rural high schools; that rural communities be encouraged to take a leadership role in cultural preservation and education and responsibility for their schools. There needs to be individualized education plans for rural high schools, developed in the context of the community, to allow parents and community leaders input on the best interests of their students. By planning on the local level, an agreement between the district and the school develops. This approach will encourage ownership of the schools and cooperative efforts on handling district-wide problems.

That the Department of Education expand its role to provide technical assistance and expertise to rural high schools, and facilitate the development of a communication network between the agencies involved in rural secondary education. By coordinating the effort to provide technical assistance to rural high schools, DOE would assist rural school to achieve and a economy of scale with urban high schools. This would also provide supportive services to assist rural high school to develop the highest quality of education and reduce teacher turnover.

That the Department of Education examine districts which have successfully incorporated site-based management and culture-based programming on the rural high school level. This will assist the State in helping other districts to develop effective plans. The Task Force specifically suggests an examination of the Lower Kuskokwim School District and the senior secondary schooling policy and plan developed by the Northwest Territories, Canada. Both of these educational systems have instituted local control programs which are proving effective. The premises of the Northwest Territories policy are similar to those of Alaska and also involve residential high school programs.

That the Association of Alaska School Boards provide mandatory school board training. This training can take advantage of telecommunication networks in order to reach rural areas. It is also recommended that this training be on-going, thus renewing the education of sitting members while educating new members.

School Personnel

Teachers

In all components of this study, teachers played a major role in everyone's mind as to the best ways to improve the quality of rural high schools. Whether quantity or quality were mentioned, most respondents felt teachers are a key to enhancing education in rural Alaska.

A major problem in the rural schools is the high teacher turnover. In any given school year rural schools have a teacher turnover rate of approximately 30%.[1] The Task Force feels that it is important to find ways to address this problem. As noted in many of the Executive Interviews, it is important for teachers to be cognizant of the area where they will be teaching. In some way, each district needs to be able to acquaint the teachers prior to being hired about the living conditions. One district uses a video program showing the community in good weather and bad, interviews with the children, parents and community leaders who talk frankly about their community. Trips to the location would be best but are prohibitively expensive. However, it is agreed that teachers need to have an honest knowledge prior to being hired.

Rural teachers should understand they will be expected to become part of the community. One interviewee stated that having the teachers keep to themselves creates a negative situation for the students and the teachers. Rural communities are small communities and teachers need to understand that their social life as well as their professional life are to be found within the community.

There are problems with certification. Many high school teachers are specialists when most rural communities need generalists. If a teacher is tenured and the school population changes, the rural school is faced with the problem of a teacher whose field they cannot utilize but must employ. The Task Force believes that attention needs to be paid to certification, labor and tenure laws as they apply in rural settings.

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[1] "Final Report of the Education Task Force of The Alaska Natives Commission", Submitted for consideration September, 1993, Approved October, 1993.

Above all, teachers must be prepared to enter and perform in the rural community. Rural teachers should receive orientation specifically designed for a small, rural, multicultural setting. This training should involve community members directly.

The Task Force also believes more Native teachers are needed in rural Alaska. Currently, approximately 3% of all teachers are Native. While some districts have a Native teacher population of up to 30%, other rural districts have none. Efforts must be made to promote teacher training among Native high school students and encourage Native college students to enter the field of education.

Support Personnel

Rural high schools are in need of support personnel. As stated earlier, there are numerous problems which rural schools face, similar to urban schools but without the resources to effectively cope with them. If steps are taken to address the administrative issues raised in the earlier section, rural high schools could have greater access to experts and training in these crucial areas. Assistance to school counselors and special education teachers are essential areas for rural high schools.

With the development of local control, the schools will be able to access community members as support personnel. Developing cultural courses should and will be able to utilize community members who have the knowledge. Local businesses can be incorporated into life skills courses. Health aides bring their expertise to health curricula. Public safety officials can participate directly in preventive personal care courses and survival skill training.

Summary

The Rural Secondary Education Task Force recommends:

That all hiring of teachers be conducted by teams to promote community input. The Task Force believes that more community input should be added to the hiring process. Involving community members in the hiring will encourage the development of ownership and responsibility for the education system, develop a consensus between the school and the community as to the purpose and goals of the school and help reduce teacher turnover.

That all teachers should be recruited or hired on site. This recommendation is for the consideration and utilization of regional and local advisory school boards. By far, this could be the most effective method of reducing teacher turnover. However the Task Force is well aware that this is an expensive option that may be well beyond the means of many school districts.

That the summer teacher orientation program at the University of Alaska Fairbanks needs to be relevant to rural Alaska. According to the research review, the rural Alaska teachers orientation program has been modified and now covers all teachers. The Task Force believes the program should re-institute the specific orientation for rural teachers.

Correspondence Programs

The Alyeska Central School, the state-operated correspondence program, had a 25% increase in enrollment for the 1993-94 school year, for an actual student count in 1993 of 1,026. The accredited program's funding per FTE (full time equivalent students) is $2,419.00, almost one-quarter the average statewide funding for public schools ($7,335.00). Most students come from urban areas where the program is an alternative to public schools. Parental choice, to teach their own children and provide individualized instruction, is the most common reason students are enrolled in Alyeska. Other reasons include: local schools do not satisfy needs; personal issues, such as pregnancy, medical, employment, etc.; and travel.

There are also approximately twenty-four correspondence programs operated by districts. Because the students enrolled in these programs are funded as full time students in the district more funds are allotted. Therefore, district-operated correspondence schools are able to have direct teacher contact and supervision. As noted in the Alaska Research Summary, this type of program is beneficial for students who are not highly self-motivated.

Almost fifty percent (50%) of rural households with high school age children rated correspondence programs as same or better than the educational program of their community high school.

The Task Force believes that correspondence must remain an option for rural students when faced with the closing of small high schools. Therefore, the most logical approach is to eliminate the duplication of services and encourage cooperation between programs.

Summary

The Rural Secondary Education Task Force recommends:

That the Alyeska Central School and public school districts work together to reduce duplicate services to rural students; that the programs should be complementary in order to share resources and become more cost efficient.

Education Technology Programs

From the first survey conducted with Mt. Edgecumbe High School graduates to the final meeting of the Task Force, expanding the curriculum and providing more academic challenge have been repeated as ways to improve the quality of rural education. Education technology programs can be effective methods for implementing both into an existing rural high school curriculum.

Distance Delivery Systems

The essential issue for the Task Force was assessing the potential for development of a distance delivery system to provide courses to enhance and broaden the curriculum of rural high schools. The approach suggested is to consider distance delivery as a fluid system. Technological advances proceed at a rapid pace and the system should be designed to take advantage of appropriate changes. Therefore, the focus was on improving the current system by addressing its problems.

More than 150 school sites in forty of the fifty-four school districts in Alaska are distance education sites, subscribing to the Satellite Telecommunications Educational Programming/Pacific Northwest Star Schools Partnership (STEP/Star), a satellite television, two-way audio system. Despite these advances there are problems primarily associated with utilizing a system based outside the state. The STEP/Star system requires self-motivation. Some of the courses do not mesh with Alaska time lines. The overall cost for the courses and obtaining technical support for the system can be difficult for a small rural high school.

The videoconferencing, fully interactive system of the North Slope Borough School District is an ideal model unavailable to other districts. Other schools are working on innovative ways to incorporate distance learning techniques effectively, such as the Distance Delivery Consortium (DDC), made up of several public, private and educational institutions within the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta. The Mat-Su School District has installed fiber optic cable connecting four of their high schools.

Distance learning technologies also offer a way to provide in-service training to teachers, aides and courses to other members of the community. For rural teachers this can mean the difference in staying and leaving. Through the use of E-mail, teacher education courses, teleconferencing and other distance delivery techniques, teachers can stay in contact and current on important issues in their fields.

Libraries

A major concern for rural high schools is the maintenance of their libraries. Libraries improve the quality of education and encourage literacy. The Task Force recognizes libraries as part of an overall information network which can benefit from education technology. When asked about ways to enhance rural high school education, libraries, computers, books, supplies were all mentioned.

Summary

The Rural Secondary Education Task Force makes the following recommendations:

That the State look toward ways to improve the educational technology systems for rural high schools, including investigating the feasibility of utilizing the Rural Alaska Television Network (RATNET) and/or re-instating LearnAlaska. The Distance Delivery Consortium is just one innovative way to delivering education in rural areas. Committee Substitute for House Bill No. 106, "An Act establishing the Alaska education technology program" specifically addresses the issues raised in this recommendation. For rural high school students, an effective education technology system can bring equity to the quality of their education. Providing in-service and support services training for teachers, aides and board members can result in lower teacher turnover and a more effective educational system.

That the State keep in mind that distance learning techniques should be viewed as a supplemental opportunity and not as a replacement for the classroom and teacher. The human interaction of the classroom is an important factor in the development of students. It is the Task Force's position that these techniques should be used to enhance and broaden curricula, not replace teachers.

That rural students should have equal access to library resources and information; that library skills should be a standard part of their high school education. Libraries are essential to the development of high school graduates who can become productive members of their communities. Local advisory boards in conjunction with all other education agencies should actively promote the access and use of libraries to promote literacy.

That libraries should be a funding priority for districts and the State; there should be a resistance to cutting those funds particularly during times of economic hardship. The Committee Substitute for House Bill No. 106 addresses the education system and publicly funded libraries. The Task Force believes that when funding gets tight, libraries are often the first to suffer. It is essential that rural areas be on an equitable standing when it comes to access to library resources and information.

Vocational Education

The majority of high school graduates will enter the work force. Therefore, education must prepare Alaska's work force. The Task Force concluded after a review of the research that vocational education must be re-defined. It is no longer just auto mechanics, welding, shop class or woodworking. However, the Task Force feels that vocational education cannot be re-defined on the statewide level. Each district needs to work with their local schools and communities to provide a local definition of vocational education. Basic skill development will provide a framework for the individualized vocational programs.

The skills which are important to the future work force are best summarized by the Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills (SCANS) established by the U. S. Department of Labor. SCANS identified five competencies and a three part foundation of skills and qualities for a solid job performance:

Competencies	**Three Part Foundation**
Resources	Basic Skills: Read, write, arithmetic,
Interpersonal	listen and speak
Information	Thinking Skills: Make decisions,
Systems	solve problems
Technology	Personal Qualities: Responsibility,
	self-esteem, honesty[2]

As a result, the Task Force believes that all rural high school students need a basic curriculum. Today, vocational training should be pursued intensely after acquiring the competencies and skills which are the basis of any high school education. Teachers must understand that they should have high expectations of all students in these areas and provide an educational environment which encourages superior performance. By developing basic skills, students will have choices as graduates. Additionally, they will be prepared to continue to learn, an attribute essential to success in the work force.

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[2] Goforth, J. Pennelope and Keith, Brynn, "Alaska's Education Reform Initiatives", Alaska Economic Trends, February, 1993, p. 1.

School districts in Alaska need to tailor programs to meet the unique needs of their high schools students. Programs need to be relevant, have some meaning to the students and the community in which they will take part. Community control and participation in the development of local high school programs will accomplish this goal. Additionally, students need to be taught how to work, develop self-discipline. These are basic tenets of any high school education. Above all, the dual track system of the past, where some high school students were enrolled in vocational education and others were considered college preparatory, should be avoided, especially in rural schools.

Teachers must have a high commitment to teaching all students and have high expectations for them. This will increase the academic challenge which the studies reviewed herein have repeatedly mentioned as needing improvement in rural high schools.

It is still important to teach skill courses for all students, such as basic home maintenance, small engine repair, health care, cooking, etc. Small high schools tend to lack the resources, such as equipment and personnel, to adequately teach these courses. School districts should look toward working with other districts and community members for solutions to these problems.

Summary

The Rural Alaska Secondary Education Task Force recommends:

That the State, districts, individual schools, businesses and communities work together to identify appropriate vocational education programs. There are private efforts working to develop successful vocational programs, such as Winning with Stronger Education (WISE) and Alaska's Youth: Ready for Work (AYRFW). These cooperative efforts are worthy of review by the State as they assist other districts and schools to develop programs.

That the State continue to support effective programs such as the Rural Student Vocational Program. (RSVP) The Task Force recognizes the value of these experiential programs. They should be re-evaluated to maximize their efficiency and effectiveness. For example, it may be beneficial for RSVP to move its sessions to the summer time. Rural students lose classroom hours throughout the school year for a variety of reasons. Since vocational education is based upon the development of basic skills, it is important that extra programs not interfere with students' basic education.

Funding

The Task Force considered some of the major issues in funding education. Discussion ranged from school taxes to developing a state lottery system with dedicated funds as in Oregon. The primary issue is how do we deal with this expensive system we have during a time of declining revenue?

Summary

The Rural Alaska Secondary Education Task Force recommends:

That the State should create a permanent endowment for education. While a public school trust fund of one-half of one percent does exist, having yielded $6.8 million in 1993, it is clearly inadequate to meet education funding needs. The Task Force supports the establishment of a permanent endowment. Such a fund would promote forward planning and funding for districts. Creation of a permanent endowment would require a constitutional amendment. The Task Force encourages the State to evaluate Senate Joint Resolution No. 7 which proposes such an amendment for action and to review Senate Bill No. 78 which relates to deadlines for action on funding of public education. Additionally, the State should investigate the possibility of a funding partnership for education between the federal and state government, an idea currently being investigated by a joint task force.

That the State consider re-implementing the school tax. The Task Force feels this is an important action to be taken, not for the comparably small amount of revenue it would generate, but for the ownership and responsibility for education it will create in all Alaskans. The old school tax was $10 per person. If it were re-established, all Alaskans would have a vested interest in the educational system. The Legislature would continue to appropriate for formula funding. The school tax should go directly into the classroom by being appropriated for buying books, supplies, computers, etc., rather than into personnel costs. A school tax also requires a constitutional amendment since it is designating tax funds. The Task Force urges the State to evaluate House Bill No. 227 relating to taxation of income to support public education, even though this bill calls for a much higher tax than proposed here.

That the State rewrite the labor and tenure laws to favor the children. This recommendation is a long-term funding issue. Most of the funds appropriated to a school district are used for personnel. The existing labor-oriented laws, such as the right to strike, favor the teacher. The Task Force strongly encourages the State to re-examine these laws with the children in mind. It is suggested that education be treated more like a business with respect to its labor force. By implementing gradual changes, for example enacting House Bill No. 288 which increases the term for tenure from two years to five years, which would strengthen the hands of the school boards representing the children and the communities, eventually there would be a financial gain for education. In addition, tenure is a particularly difficult subject for rural areas. At the very least, the tenure laws should be reworked to meet the unique needs of rural districts.

That the State include declining revenue as appropriate cause for the layoff of tenured teachers. Currently, tenured personnel may only be laid off if there is a drop in enrollment. For rural areas, this creates particular difficulties. The Task Force strongly urges the State to include a decline in revenues as just cause of a lay off of tenured personnel.

That the State protect the funding for programs supporting Native teachers. During this decline in revenues, it is imperative to the rural communities that programs which will ultimately serve their students well be protected. These include programs such as the Cross Cultural Education Development Program (XCED) and Rural Alaska Honors Institute (RAHI).

Residential High Schools

The Rural Community Household Survey indicated that fifty percent (50%) of all rural households with high school age children rated the educational opportunities available at a boarding school as better than what is available in their communities. Among Native households with high school age children, the percentage rating boarding schools as better rose to fifty-seven percent (57%) compared to thirty-nine percent (39%) of non-Natives. Four in ten rural households with high school age children have considered boarding schools for their children. However, most of these households do not send their children to boarding schools. The main reasons are that the children would not go, the parents would miss their children, the cost is too high, or they could not get their child(ren) into a boarding school.

Among the Mt. Edgecumbe High School (MEHS) graduates surveyed, nearly three-quarters (73%) would like to see their own children attend MEHS. Thirteen percent (13%) preferred their children go to the local/community high school. One percent indicated they would prefer their children to go to a regional boarding high school. More than half of the graduates wanted their children to go to MEHS because of the academic challenge. Other reasons included good discipline, extra-curricular activities, expanded/good curriculum and better/more teachers. Among those who preferred not to send their children to MEHS the most often cited reasons were the parents would miss their children and the school would be too far away from home. Others commented adversely about the residence hall/dormitory lifestyle.

The Alaska Research Summary reviewed history of education in Alaska, in which boarding schools played a prominent role. Unfortunately, for many rural residents, boarding schools are considered a negative experience. During the early 1970's, students did not have the option of attending boarding schools, rather they were forced to attend. Some of the schools lacked discipline and control. Students were often subject to the influences of the host community. In fact, many students suffered permanent psychological and social problems.

Yet, today there is a waiting list for entrance into MEHS. Despite the sixty-two percent (62%) of rural households who think local/community high schools are the best way to educate rural children, there is enough demand to consider the possibility of another residential high school.

The Task Force considered five options with regard to residential high schools:

- Maintain the present status with MEHS as the only state-operated boarding high school.
- Build a new state-operated residential high school.
- Refurbish some existing federal/state/private surplus facilities.
- Expand MEHS.
- Develop regional consolidated high schools.

Advantages and Disadvantages

There are a number of advantages to residential high schools, especially MEHS. One of the most important is MEHS provides **a valuable option** to rural high school students. Most rural high schools cannot offer the **diverse, comprehensive curriculum** of MEHS. Rural students have a priority for admission to MEHS. Therefore, those students seeking this type of academic challenge have a chance of attending MEHS.

MEHS has **a strong tradition for providing a high quality education**. Since MEHS re-opened in 1985, it has gone through several positive and negative cycles. Nonetheless, MEHS maintains its ability to attract good teachers and produce graduates with a reputation for strong leadership.

The Graduate Survey indicated that sixty-eight percent (68%) of the MEHS graduates surveyed had continued on to college/university. Another eleven percent (11%) entered technical/trade school and another seven percent (7%) went into military service. Of those who continued on to college or trade school, thirteen percent (13%) have received a degree or certificate, sixty-nine percent (69%) are currently enrolled and twenty-five percent (25%) are employed. These data indicate that MEHS seems to **facilitate the social and academic transition to college**.

Other advantages to residential high schools, and MEHS in particular, include **exposing students to a variety of cultures, a specialized vocational education program, and the specialized Pacific Rim studies program**.

The Alaska Research Summary indicated some of the more serious disadvantages to boarding schools. A primary one is the **loss of family and cultural ties** to the home community. The Task Force believes that ninth and tenth graders are just too immature to handle being away from home at this crucial time in their development. Parental guidance is important as is the maintenance of cultural traditions. Boarding school requires students to leave home at a time when they would be starting to learn adult roles in their villages.

During the public hearings, persons from rural communities testified to the fact that the selective admission policy of MEHS encourages students who provide the leadership in the local high school to leave the community. Community members feel MEHS **takes the best and brightest students** from the rural high schools. These are the students who often show the most potential for taking leadership in the community. Associated with this is the **funding drain** from the rural high schools. Each time a student opts to attend MEHS, a rural school loses the funding associated with that student.

Additionally, there is a **high cost** associated with maintaining MEHS. Whereas the statewide average per full time equivalent student is $7,335, with the additional funds to support the boarding of the student, the average per full time equivalent student at MEHS is several times that figure.

A final disadvantage to boarding schools is that it **reduces parents' interests in improving local high schools**.

Maintain the Present Status

Currently, MEHS in Sitka is the only state-operated boarding high school. While MEHS has its own superintendent, it is not recognized as an independent school district. Therefore, residential funding is obtained as a direct appropriation through the Department of Education, the operational costs are financed through formula funding, and the State Board of Education acts as its governing body. The Task Force finds this structure does not allow for any local/community input.

A primary consideration of maintaining the present status is that demand would continue to exceed capacity. There is no other option for rural students other than being on the waiting list. Cost would remain a factor and rural high schools would continue to lose many of the best students to MEHS.

Construct a New State-Operated Residential High School

This option would allow the existing and future demand for entrance to a residential high school program to be met. It would provide another option for rural students. There is a small possibility, depending on where it was built, that at least some rural students would be in their own cultural/geographic area and there could be some cost savings.

However, the current status of education funding makes this option extremely remote. Building and maintaining another residential high school by the state would be a costly proposition. There are associated difficulties in finding an appropriate host community (See Boarding School Site Criteria). Most notably, the interviews with Judith Kleinfeld and others with expertise on boarding schools stated that the subtle social and psychological factors which made programs like MEHS, Covenant and St. Mary's boarding programs successful cannot be created on demand.

Refurbish an Existing Facility

Refurbishing is possibly a less costly approach than building a new facility. Working with a federal or private facility could lend itself to some creative financing. The major drawback to this option is that site selection is limited to those communities which have available facilities.

Expansion of Mt. Edgecumbe High School

Less cost than new construction, serve the waiting list of students, the ability to expand programs and continuing to take advantage of the existing benefits of MEHS are all good reasons to expand MEHS. There is a chance MEHS may lose its sense of community, however. A recent article in the MEHS newspaper discussed this issue from a student's perspective. There is a real feeling of community, a support of the individual, which is an important factor for MEHS. Expanding to four hundred students could endanger that sense of community.

Additionally, there is still a funding issue. Capital funds are lacking to cover the expansion even though MEHS has land and buildings available.

Expanding MEHS does not deal with the disadvantages raised about residential high schools such as taking the children away when they are too immature and the continued drain of human and financial resources from local high schools. Therefore, the Task Force developed a significant change designed to address these issues. Rather than MEHS expanding physically to accommodate more students, they discussed having MEHS expand academically to accept eleventh and twelfth grade rural students to a four year education program which incorporates post-secondary education. The concept is to have MEHS develop a junior college program.

The advantages of a junior college approach addresses some of the issues for residential high schools. That is, the students would be older and better prepared to be away from their home communities. Local high schools would continue to receive support for the majority of the students. This program would be specifically designed for college preparatory students and could develop a strong vocational education component.

District-Operated Consolidated High Schools

The last option the Task Force considered was regional residential high schools operated by districts. Each district would determine if such a school was warranted. For example, the Yupiit School district currently has a proposal to consolidate three of its high schools. The students of these schools would be residential, even in the host community, and the district would be responsible for operating the school.

A major advantage to a district-operated residential high school is the ability of that program to be under a local advisory board. Parents and community members could continue to provide input on their children's educational program and the school would be accountable to the community. Also, there would not be a funding or human resource drain since the students remain in the district.

A consolidated program could be more comprehensive, take advantage of education technology to provide a more diverse curriculum, thus achieving an economy of scale to the urban education programs. Programs could be customized, enhancing and encouraging the cultural/geographic links between school and community.

There would be no significant savings or loss compared to the present system within a district. However, dormitory/residence halls would have to be constructed. A review of the Western Arctic Leadership Program (WALP), a residential high school leadership program currently running in the Northwest Territories, Canada could prove useful when considering options for dormitory/residence halls.[3]

Of course, the whole idea of a "boarding school" may present a problem with some residents. However, this may be overcome by having the local advisory board and encouraging parental/community involvement.

A related problem may be that being so close to home, some students when faced with difficulties can leave and go home. It would be important to have supportive services such as school and peer counselors.

A district-operated consolidated high school has many advantages over a state-operated residential high school. Many of the problems found in a state-operated school are overcome in a district-operated school, except students may not necessarily be exposed to a variety of cultures outside of their own cultural/geographic area.

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3 "Review of the Western Arctic Leadership Program", Northwest Territories, January 1994.

Summary

The Rural Secondary Education Task Force makes the following recommendations:

That an advisory school board be created for Mt. Edgecumbe High School. MEHS needs to increase parental and community involvement. A school board whose members reflect the communities represented in the student body could provide that involvement and guidance to the superintendent of MEHS. It is the Task Force's understanding that the MEHS Alumni Association is actively promoting the creation of such an oversight group and supports those efforts.

That the State investigate the feasibility of developing a junior college curriculum/program and a supplemental summer program at Mt. Edgecumbe for rural high school students. The research strongly supports the need for strengthening the preparation of college bound rural students. The Task Force believes that rural students might best be served by expanding Mt. Edgecumbe into an organized junior college program which starts in the eleventh grade and actively assists in the transition to bachelor level post secondary education or technical/trade training. Additionally, such a program could be supportive of the local high schools, rather than draining the resources of the local high schools.

That the State facilitate the development of consolidated high schools at the district/REAA level. This recommendation supports the concept of local control. The Task Force recognizes that consolidated high schools are not appropriate for every district/REAA. However, each district/REAA should be allowed to assess this option and receive the support of the Department of Education for its implementation. For some districts, this may be a first preference when faced with closing very small schools. This approach allows rural students to stay within their cultural/geographic area and maintain their family ties. The research in each area of this study snows overwhelming support for educating students within or at least close to their home communities when possible.

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